



Pollution Kills Record Amount of Bay Grasses

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ANNAPOLIS, Md. (AP) - Last year's heavy rains pushed more pollution into the ailing Chesapeake Bay than environmental experts anticipated, killing off a record 30 percent of the estuary's valuable underwater grasses.

Until Tuesday's announcement by the state and federal Chesapeake Bay Program, environmental officials touted bay grasses as one bright spot in the story of the bay's health. Grass beds had been at an all-time high - nearly 90,000 acres - after the droughts of 2000 and 2001 slowed runoff pollution.

But the wet spring and summer of 2003 washed "massive amounts" of sediment and nutrient pollution into the bay, the program said. The extra sediment clouds the water, blocking sunlight, and nutrients fuel algae blooms that suck oxygen from the water.

Aerial photographs taken from May to October show about 65,000 acres of grass beds, which are critical to the bay's ecosystem because they provide food and protection for crabs, fish and waterfowl.

On Maryland's side of the bay, the average drop in grass beds was even higher - 41 percent, according to the state Department of Natural Resources.

The decline was the biggest single-year drop since the bay program began keeping records in 1984, and it backtracked grass acreage to levels of 1995.

Chris Conner of the bay program, which coordinates state and federal efforts to clean up the bay, said government scientists largely attribute the die-off to the tremendous increase in how much river water flows into the estuary.

Daily river flow into the bay was more than twice the average of 2002, he said, quoting figures from the U.S. Geological Survey.

The increased flow from the nine largest tributaries brought three times more nitrogen than in 2002 and five times more phosphorus.

"We thought the grasses had gotten strong enough that they would be able to withstand this kind of (nutrient) load," said Theresa Pierno, vice president of environmental protection and restoration at the nonprofit Chesapeake Bay Foundation. "Unfortunately it's clear that isn't the case."

Bay advocates blamed the fluctuations in grass levels on poor buffers and wetland protections. With better safeguards on the bay's shores, less urban and agricultural pollution would flow into the water, Pierno said.

"The reality is we cannot be hostage totally to the weather," she said. "It's up to us to make sure the natural buffers are there."

Mike Fritz, living resources coordinator for the bay program, agreed.

"This demonstrates a problem on the landscape," he said. The fluctuations show "how fragile our system is right now," because the bay doesn't have enough buffers to absorb extra runoff in rainy years.

The middle bay, from the Chesapeake Bay Bridge south to the Rappahannock River and Pocomoke Sound, lost the most grasses - a 41 percent drop. The upper bay, south to the Chester and Magothy rivers, lost 20 percent of its grasses. The lower bay saw the lowest decline - 12 percent.

DNR scientists hope new techniques of harvesting and planting seeds, part of current experiments, may yield more successful grass beds. Traditional methods of planting adult grass beds are slow and labor-intensive.

State officials in the 64,000-square-mile watershed have set a bay-wide goal of seeing 185,000 acres of healthy grasses by 2010.

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